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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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An Italian Education; No Better Place to Grow Up Than Italy: Or, How Italians Become Italian
by Tim Parks. NY: Avon Books, 1995. ISBN: 0380727609

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Stereotypes about people who live in different countries are so pervasive, one barely knows how one came to believe that Germans are well-organized, the English are a bit standoffish, the French are terribly civilized, Americans gregarious and friendly but also loud and pushy, and ... that Italians are sensual, easy-going, and hold family dear. But to what extent *do* a country's citizens reflect a set of national characteristics? And how do such national characteristics become formed in each generation, perpetuating themselves even where television and travel have created a "global village"?

Tim Parks, a British expatriate who has lived in a small village in Italy, near Verona, since 1981, examines such questions in his immensely readable and intriguing "An Italian Education." In this book — which has vast appeal for anyone interested in Italy, or parenting, or acculturation, or in the whole notion of "national characteristics" — Parks writes engagingly and honestly of how his own two children, born to a British father and an Italian mother, become Italian. The influences that make them little Italians, not little Brits or little Americans, are subtle and not-so-subtle, and, in Parks' humorous telling, the reader comes to learn a great deal not only about middle-class Italy, but about the way in which each of us has inevitably acquired the standard traits of the culture in which we were raised.

Parks notes early on, in explaining why he ended up writing not just one but two books about life in Italy (he has also written of Italy in *Italian Neighbors* and is a novelist and translator who has studied at Cambridge University and at Harvard and teaches English at the University of Verona): "...places *are* different. Splendidly so. ... once one has discounted individual traits, class attitudes, generation gaps, and, of course, the myriad manifestations of different personalities, still a substrate of national character does exist. The French *are* French somehow, the Germans are predictably German, the Italians, I was slowly discovering, indisputably Italian."

In *An Italian Education*, Parks recounts tale after tale that convinces the reader completely of this point. Using wry humor and writing as a British citizen on foreign soil, Parks is inevitably compared with **Peter Mayle** (of the hilarious Provence books), but there is more substance and more depth in Parks' book. There is no lack of humor, but within irony lies the insights of an anthropologist — an anthropologist who writes personally and thinks as a father, allowing himself to be immersed in, as well as detached from, his adopted home. Thus Parks is careful to place each of his stories in the context of his thesis: that there is

something essentially Italian about Italians, and there is a discernible method by which it is imparted.

According to Parks, first and foremost (even over the well-ingrained need for physical security in the form of metal doors and automatic gates) is Italy's reverence for children (especially sons) and for mothers. Starting from birth, when hospitals strictly control visiting hours — which are actually "viewing" hours, since the babies are kept behind glass for all but their mothers — Parks shows how the fanaticism and enthusiasm with which Italians greet their newborn children reflects a "desire to worship." The "viewing hours" contrast tellingly with the comparatively casual visits in American or English hospitals, and set the tone for the baby worship to follow. As for the reverence for motherhood, one can empathize with Parks' view that there is no

place more desirable in which to raise children than Italy, when one reads of the serious and sacred status of "mamma." Parks notes, with his usual irony, that "it is one of the curiosities of Italy that even in the heyday of feminism, even in times when the only child is left with his grandparents while Mother is off to work, the mamma mystique has lost none of its attraction and power." This mystique is embedded in the pervasive Catholic imagery of Madonna and child, and, in one Italian publication Parks quotes, mother is (typically) seen as "that person the whole world esteems, whom children seek and love, the Bible celebrates, the saints venerate, churchmen honor, monks do not forget, nuns emulate, the suffering invoke, the poets sing of, writers exalt ..." Reading

from within in a culture that seems to think of mothers as needy individuals who have "made a (poor?) choice" and should live with the consequences without any support from the rest of society, this placing of mothers on a national pedestal certainly has its appeal.

In Parks' family, the preference for mamma is played out endlessly in daily battles over who will help with his homework or tell a story. Parks seems to find the absence of demands created by the peripheral role of the Italian father freeing, and laughs at the excesses of Mother's Day, and when he discovers that the only Italian lullaby he can find with a daddy in it is one in which a child puts her father to sleep.

Parks makes much of the idea that Italy is, in the current middle-class generation, a country of the only child. As Parks relates it, the average Italian looks with horror upon the notion of more than one child, primarily because of the vast amount of time and money involved in raising one according to the standards of the day. As Parks tells it, the typical child is indulged, provided with excessive material goods, coveted, overprotected, and, in general, spoiled, while paradoxically required to live in an immaculate home that is not set up for raucous horseplay. Little Giovanni (for families with boys are particularly likely not to have additional children) is likely to remain safe and clean in his playpen, well away from the expensive furnishings, and then

continued on page 45



Book Reviews
from page 44

will be provided with a car, and later, his first apartment, out of his doting parents' wallets. The prospect of having to provide offspring with their first homes is apparently a stumbling block that prevents more Italians from having additional children. Parks gets a lot of mileage out of the sheer disbelief with which his second — and then third (who has not quite been born by the end of the book) — children's arrivals are greeted. "You're crazy having another ... crazy" says his father-in-law, who has just received a written critique from one of his three children, reminding him that it is his duty to sell his property and pass along the inheritance without making his children wait for his death.

If all this sounds a bit unappealing, Parks manages somehow to revel in such an excess of love and obligation and affection. He is careful to tell the reader he loves Italy. And the reason he does is never so clear as in the contrast between Parks' British upbringing and that of his children. This contrast is clearly defined when Parks describes his family's annual vacation by the sea; same sea, same town, each summer: the tacky but lovable Pescara. Parks recalls his own childhood training, when a vacation meant "holidays of adventure and risk, 'a long trek in the rain or extended visits to museums, tricky climbs on rocks, 'foaming surf, hard shale, precipitous paths ...' holidays in which, characteristically, after a long hike in a downpour, mother would end with a rousing 'well, that was a good trek; what shall we do tomorrow?'" These were, as Parks says, "holidays that made a hero of you ... holidays that made you English."

Meanwhile, Parks and his children revel in the goal-less holidays, so unlike those of his boyhood, that do anything but develop a stiff upper lip. His family holidays make his children Italian (and in so doing, make them ever so slightly alien to him, one senses). In Pescara, there is the sea, and the sun, and the

wonderful food. The food, the sun, the sea. Nothing more, nothing less. There is no notion of adventure, risk, exploration, or excessive activity. Life rolls forward from day to day in a series of identical days: beach in the morning, with careful concern not to overdo the sun, followed by lunch, siesta, and a little biking or beaching in the afternoon.

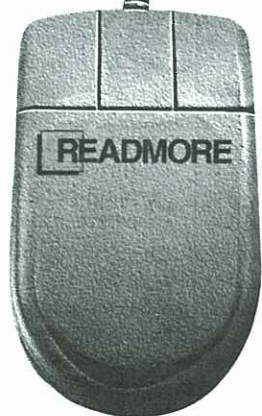
Parks, with his characteristic means of drawing telling parallels, points out that in English, the word "adventure" means a hazardous enterprise or an exciting experience, with "respectable connotations of courage and bravado on the part of he who risks." In vernacular Italian, on the other hand, "avventura" means a brief affair. And indeed, one thing his children learn on holiday is that love affairs and liaisons, the intrigue between the sexes, need not be hidden. Openly, the teenagers neck and cling, making Parks feel no small relief that his children will not be weighed down by the inhibitions that burdened him. His preadolescent children follow the daily drama of a lifeguard and his sexy girlfriend closely. Sex is sold on every poster; in Pescara, sensuality is in the very air they breathe.

Along with an open, generous sensuality, Parks has the novelist's eye for the many occasions on which children are subtly taught other Italian values — such as how to perceive rules. When his son Michele develops a passion for fishing, Parks is led into a world totally unlike England, in which elaborate licensing procedures are the law, but the real rule to learn is how to appropriately ignore the law. On one apocalyptic (and hilariously described) fishing expedition, his son learns that although there are laws — like the one that forbids metal fishing lures — they need not be treated with particular respect.

The Italy that shapes Parks' children is one in which authority is important as an idea and for appearance's sake, but not in the traditional sense as providing a structure to follow automatically. Adults and children, following their example, ignore the speeches at political events, and interpret their religion as it suits

continued on page 46

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Book Reviews
from page 45

them. Laws, such as the need for seatbelts in the back seat, are ignored and often rescinded when a belligerent public refuses to comply.

In a summary such as this one, it may appear that *An Italian Education* is facile — or even condescending — in its introduction to Italian ways, but if Parks is ironic and honest, he is never glib in his comparisons and descriptions. He leads the reader as he was lead, layer by layer, through the various elements of the Italian psyche — religion, motherhood, and family duty — so that we as readers slowly come to see what he came to see: that every day, in so many variant ways, (a trip to the store, the emphasis on food at school, the importance of appearance in the moment rather than long-term follow-through, the importance of attending catechism but not on following the rules oneself) Italian children are being taught to be Italian. Parks laughs at the contradictions but rejoices in the lovable richness of the culture around him.

Parks does not make much, directly, of his own feelings upon seeing his children become different from himself in their values and approach to life. But at many points the clash of his own background and the one in which his children are being reared seems to separate him from his children, and he accepts this with apparent good cheer. (Indeed, even though Parks' wry observations an unsentimental vision may lead a reader to think he doesn't like Italy, he clearly has developed a complex fondness

for his adopted home and feels it is the most civilized place in which to raise children.) On one occasion, his dour British soul leads him to expect his son to fail on his first fishing expedition, but, against all odds, his son catches a bucketful of fish. Parks seems to feel resignation but also a bit of pride that his son will now, inevitably, become another absurdly optimistic Italian, who know everything will come to him, as it should.

I picked up this book because it was sold as something to be enjoyed by fans of **Peter Mayle**, and out of interest in the topic of how a parent feels when his own children are raised in another culture, with the inevitable distancing this must create. I ended it with immense respect for Parks as a cultural observer, a funny and yet astute writer, as a careful thinker, and an open-minded parent who can accept difference with pride good humor. Although I cannot vouch for the accuracy of his impressions of Italy, never having been there or having studied the culture, I cannot imagine any reader who is in any way a cultural observer not enjoying this book; one leaves it with a new understanding and affection for Italy, and perhaps most importantly with a greater appreciation for the social forces that shape us, and with a keener eye for those subtle influences in our own society, which stamp us, for better and for worse, as Americans. In the end, I was enchanted by Parks' Italy, but very happy to live where I do. What more can one ask from a travel book than to acquire new appreciation for another culture, new knowledge and insights, long with renewed appreciation that "there's no place like home"? 🌿

From the Reference Desk
from page 43

last edition published in 1982. The major portion of this work is devoted to two chronologies, a basic chronology by year and a topical chronology by broad subject category. There is also a section of 450 brief biographical sketches and a section on the

structure of the federal government, including listings of the presidents and their cabinet members, a review of party strength in Congress since 1789 as well as a list of all the Supreme Court justices. Of the two of these books, the *Encyclopedia of American History* seems the more extensively updated, but given the dates of the prior editions, libraries might want to consider them both if the budget permits. 🌿

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